

## Is That “Home to Rent” Listing Real or a Scam?

In spring and summer, millions of Americans will make a move to a new rental home or apartment. Recent college graduates start to look for their first homes and parents wait for summer break to minimize disruption for their school-aged children. It's an exciting time, but you need to be alert to avoid falling for a fraudulent rental scam.

How the scam works: You search for an apartment or house using a listing website such as Craigslist or Zillow. When you find one that's of interest, you contact the listed owner or representative. The contact patiently answers questions, negotiates the price and goes over who is responsible for maintenance. They have you sign a lease and request a security deposit and one month's rent. Once you pay, however, they disappear and you realize that there was never an actual home to rent. In some cases, victims have arrived at their new home with a moving truck only to find out that the listing was fictitious, they are out a lot of money and have no place go.

Fraudsters are pros at making rental listings appear legitimate and providing the details necessary to gain your confidence. Some rip off actual apartment listings so that the pictures, addresses, and details to look legit.

So, if you are in the market for a home to rent, pay attention to these tips to avoid being scammed:

- Never pay your security deposit or first month's rent by wire transfer, pre-paid debit cards or gift cards. Payments made with this way are like paying cash – they are impossible to trace, and leave you with little to no recourse should you fall victim to this scam.
- Don't pay for anything before you see the inside of the apartment. Scammers are good at coming up with convenient excuses so insist on seeing the unit before you pay. If the landlord or representative refuses, it is a scam.
- If you are moving to a new city and cannot visit before the move, ask a friend to look at the apartment. If you don't know anyone in the city and cannot inspect your new home before paying a deposit, do some research on the listing agent or the management company to make sure that your contact is not an imposter.
- Be wary of leasing an apartment from someone who is far away, but offers to mail you the key once they receive payment. This is a red flag of a scam. The fraudster will simply end communication with you once they receive your money.

If you suspect that you have become a victim, report it immediately to the Howard County Office of Consumer Protection by email at [consumer@howardcountymd.gov](mailto:consumer@howardcountymd.gov) or by phone at 410-313-6420 (voice/relay).

**For more information on this or other consumer topics or to request this publication in an alternative format, contact the Office of Consumer Protection.**